

The Wretched

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The Wretched

by [AceofNowhere](#)

Summary

“We are strangers, but I want to help.”

He growls at her, mocking and mistrustful.

“I understand,” she said. “You think I am one of them. I certainly look like one of them. But I want to help you. Will you let me?”

Prompt: fairytale. Alina saves a dragon.

Notes

Oh I'm about to fuck you up a little.

Edit: Oh my god! The incredible [leadingrebel](#) created some I N C R E D I B L E art for this story. Please send her your support by checking it out and giving it a like! See it either on:

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When Alina finds the black dragon gasping and bleeding behind the bushes near her cave, she can't help but feel slightly annoyed. The rasping noise coming from its mouth is loud enough to hear down the side of the mountain, and she knows it's only a matter of time before it's found and disposed of, potentially her along with it.

It's not quite in her greater nature to care for things that don't belong to her, but here she makes the exception.

He's not so large it's impossible to move him, but it does take a bit to wait until he sleeps, to slip a muzzle over his bleeding mouth, and to cart his thrashing and now very much awake body into her home.

She sets him on the floor near the fire and he almost calms down, leaning into the heat like a comfort. She doesn't remove the muzzle, but she stares deeply into his eyes and speaks slowly.

"We are strangers, but I want to help."

He growls at her, mocking and mistrustful.

"I understand," she said. "You think I am one of them. I certainly look like one of them. But I want to help you. Will you let me?"

He glares at her again, trying to snap his jaws at her, as though warning her of what he's capable of. She nods, believing him. There's a reason, after all, she'd kept that muzzle tight around him.

But after a long moment he begins to relax, and lean again toward the fire. He rolls his eyes upward and looks away from her, as though she doesn't exist. It's the closest to permission she'll get, and so she gets to work, cleaning and dressing his wound.

He growls and mutters and hisses as she works, but he never pulls away—not intentionally—and she doesn't condescend by cooing in his ear as she might have years ago. She's been alone too long to see any merit in false comfort.

By the time she's finished, he's sleeping by the fire, scales warm to the touch and breath fading from a rasp to a deep rumble. She places adequate water mixed with a meaty broth beside him in his reach, and she leaves her cave to clean up the bloody mess that was left in the bushes.

She wants no trace there was anything here at all. She's been invisible for years, and she wishes to keep it this way.

When she returns, the broth bowl is empty, and the dragon stares out at her with one black eye, following her movements around the cave. She'd made sure the muzzle was tight enough so he couldn't bite her, but she's pleased to see there was enough leeway for him to

drink comfortably. Only a few drops indicate the slightly desperate manner in which he'd drunk the broth.

Perhaps because she's been alone too long, but she speaks to him.

"Glad to see you're eating so soon," she says. "Wasn't too bad of a wound on your face, though I'm sure it's going to leave some scars."

His breath catches suddenly and he's growling, but not at her, at the memory.

"Don't worry," she assures him. "The scars will hardly show. Only those stupid enough to get too close will see them."

He understands her well enough and scoffs. He shuffles, near the fire, getting ever closer to it, almost blocking her from it. He looks comfortable enough, and she tells him as much. He licks his muzzle in response, and she returns to her kitchen to make more broth. A healing dragon will need a lot of it; she knows less from experience and more from intuition.

She'll have to use up more of her stores, but it's still autumn, so she doesn't worry too much. She still has time to resupply. Maybe if her dragon heals quickly and feels generous, he might supply her with a gift of a goat or two when he leaves.

The sound of her own voice is a novelty, and is the only reason she can think why she speaks to him again. "The wound in your side will take awhile to heal."

She goes to her cabinet and selects a few concoctions. She eyes her newt, swimming in the brine, and shakes her head. She's become too attached to the small creature to use him for a cantankerous dragon that will heal soon enough anyway. The newt bubbles its thanks and she grabs the cinnamon instead. It's not a healing ingredient, but it makes the potion smell nice, and sometimes that goes as long a way as medicine does.

"You'll be here for a few days. Kindly relieve yourself in the corner there, but don't go outside for a few days at least. They'll be up here no doubt, looking for you."

The dragon growls, its black scales shaking in anger. She nods, understanding. "I know," she says, and leaves it at that.

That night Alina dreams she's down by the creek at the base of the mountain. It's cold out, winter, and she clutches her dream shawl around her, even though it barely saves her from the chill.

"You've been here too long."

Alina looks to her left and sees a young man perched on a rock. He has thick black hair and bright gray eyes. She tilts her head, taking her time to assess him before she cares to answer.

"A while, yes," she answers, burrowing deeper into her shawl. In her dream, she isn't wearing shoes, and this is a problem. Curiosity, bitterness maybe, can't stop her from pressing his point. "Why would you say 'too long'?"

He draws up near her, looking her arms up and down as though thinking about warming them with his hands, but he doesn't.

"The mountain tells me."

Alina laughs. Not because she thinks him silly for speaking about talking mountains, but that this mountain would wish her gone. The idea of the mountain complaining about her to this beautiful man is hilarious.

Her laughter is interrupted when he grabs her chin and pulls her attention toward him. "You are suffering, and you are letting it happen."

Alina stops laughing at that, and in moments, awakens.

The next day, Alina takes care of her chores, skirting around the dragon and allowing him to take up space. He's oddly comfortable where he is, hardly looking at her and enjoying his place by the roaring fire. Once or twice he tries to stoke it with his own flames, but they come out in a puff of smoke, and he growls every time to let her and himself know he's not pleased by it.

Alina says nothing and leaves to find more firewood.

She's cautious as she leaves her cave, looking about and startling as easily as a deer when she hears the grass shift and shudder from the wind. If hunters come looking for her dragon, they have no way out. Alina is no fighter, and the dragon is in no state to be defending either of them. The only way out of that cave is in.

Not a particularly advantageous or tactical decision on her part when she made it her home several years ago, but then, she'd found it when she'd been desperate. In that dead of winter, when she'd been driven out of the village, the cave had been the only shelter. She was comfortable there now, and she hadn't planned on caring for a dragon, so she thought she could be forgiven if she didn't have the perfect dwelling to survive a siege.

Alina grabs plenty of herbs, more than she thinks she'll need, and stuffs them into the makeshift bowl of her skirt. She hums to the tune of the butterfly's wings, sighs and breathes with flashes of the sun's rays. She so much prefers the outside to her small cave, but home is home, or rather, safety is invisibility.

The less time she spends wandering about, the less chance she'll be seen and hanged, or worse, burned at the stake.

Alina quirks her lips into a smile as she picks a few snapdragons from a meadow. Funny then, she thinks, she basically has two furnaces in her home now.

She returns to the cave to find the dragon sleeping. His breaths are heavy and she looks closer at him now than she did while he was awake. The scars on his face will heal nicely, but the wound in his belly will be a broadcasted mark for anyone to take advantage of in the future. She hopes it will patch up with thick new scales, but she's never healed a dragon before.

She wishes it would speak to her, but not all dragons can speak the language of humans. In fact, she is lucky that this one seems to understand her at all.

Alina begins assembling her herbs, and places the snapdragon flowers she'd picked into a small vase filled with water. They will hardly last two days in the dark underground, but she can't help but want to see the prettiness of the outdoors reflected in her home.

Alina could dream, after all.

That night, Alina is not by the stream, but somewhere unfamiliar. She is on the side of a mountain, and yes, it is cold, colder than her previous dream even.

But the young man is there, too.

He comes up from behind her, a depth of space between them.

"Maybe you have been here too long," Alina tells him, looking around at her surroundings and carefully ignoring him.

He pauses in the snow. "Why do you say this?"

"You are angry," she says, and she can feel the cold deepen in her bones. "You are wretched and in pain."

"Anger is strength," he says. "Wretchedness is temporary."

"And what about pain?"

"Pain," he says, grabbing her scarred hands, "is natural."

On the third day from when she began caring for her dragon, Alina stays inside and begins patching up her quilt.

The cold from the dreams is catching up to her it seems, and she is determined to make sure her winter is a warm one. She takes old clothing and cleans it, uses it to add more layers to her warmest blanket. Alina doesn't need much to survive, but what she does have must last. She rips up a skirt long overused and gives it one more use.

The dragon sleeps beside her.

She wishes she could draw him away from the fire so she can warm her feet, but she doesn't have the heart to wake him. She lets him sleep, doze, and wiggle, and doesn't ask for anything more.

His wound is healing, and that's a good sign.

It's her third dream in three nights, and Alina is now at the top of the mountain. She looks out at the incredible view, but it's dampened by the harsh wind that steals her shawl.

Shoeless and shawl-less, Alina clutches her arms around her and breathes in the biting cold. She doesn't know if she'll survive this dream.

Wings shelter her from behind, and Alina can't help but lean back into the warmth at her back. The young man whispers in her ear.

"This is yours, you know." He opens one of the wings and she peeks out again, seeing the vast stretch of land before them. She thinks there are villages down there, but she can't be sure. The lights below could be a reflection of the moon, or an illusion. She knows this isn't her vision, but she's still grateful to be part of its beauty.

"This is not mine," she says, and she feels his warm cheek press against her own. She shudders and presses back, longing for the warmth that's eluded her so long.

"Not if you don't take it."

Alina shivers, and wraps his arms around her. In silence, they stare at the world below.

On the fourth day, the dragon lays its head in her lap, finally entrusting her with himself. She grazes her fingertips lightly over the sides of his head, the smooth scales deceptively sharp beneath them, and he wraps his tail around her feet.

They stay like that, for a while.



Art by [Oukyn/leadingrebel](#)

In the peaceful morning, the crackling of the fire is the loudest thing in their world. The dragon's humming breath sends quivers up her legs to her stomach, and she allows herself to smile.

The muzzle had come off long ago, and the scars on the dragon's face are almost completely gone. Only slightly raised silver lines mark the scratches caused by men's spears. She takes care to avoid them, to not remind him of his pain, and instead she runs a hand down his long neck.

He purrs under her hands, and her smile grows wider.

Her heart settles when she realizes that before long, he will be strong enough to leave her.

But that night, he isn't given the chance.

Alina screams when her home is raided by large angry men with spears and guns and bolos. They've found her somehow and in the midst of another dream, one she can't recall while awake and petrified, attack them both.

Clubs are slammed against the sides of her cave and the shots from the gun echo so loud she is sure the cave will collapse.

Alina screams when they come for her dragon, who belches and gasps and floods the cave with a fire that isn't strong enough to help him.

The spear that pierces his heart sounds like Alina's world crashing down.

They hold her against the wall, not content with taking her dragon, but taking her dignity too, but there is no further witch-hunting that night. They leave with the dragon's head, and Alina is left to cry over the body they've left behind.

That winter is a cold one, and this time, there is no young man to warm her in her dreams.

The following spring, Alina goes into the meadow to pick snapdragons and lay them at the grave of her dragon. She'd wanted to bury him close to her, by the bushes where she'd first found him, but knew it wasn't the smart thing to do. Burying him away from her would protect them both.

When she gets to his grave, she lets out a soft sigh of despair. The grave is robbed; claw marks littering the sides tell her an animal, desperate and hungry, had come to eat his meat.

Alina stares up at the sun and holds her tears.

Dragon tears can heal the dying, but Alina's tears heal nothing.

The last day of spring is bitterly cold. Alina clutches her blanket around her and feels what is coming.

She should have left months ago, when she and her dragon had been found, but she could never bring herself to.

She has been there too long, in the deep of the mountain: petrified, lonely, in pain.

She is as wretched as the man from her dreams, but she will not budge. This is her home; it is the last thing she had to call hers. If they want to find and bury her here, she is too tired to stop them.

The wind howls outside and Alina can hear that screaming wind as though it is just outside her door. She shivers and tucks her legs beneath her, covering her head with her patchwork quilt and willing her strength to hold through the night.

But the screams never cease.

In the morning, Alina has never known such quiet at the start of summer. She finds herself wandering, poking her head through the trees, wondering where all life has gone.

The wind rustles still between the grass, the birds are chirping overhead, but the presence that clouds and permeates her meadows is unfamiliar to her.

She enters a clearing and stops dead in her tracks.

She sees a man, down by the stream, at the base of her mountain.

She panics a moment, knowing she's gone too far from her cave. She steps back, but a twig snaps under her bare foot. She stops breathing and looks beneath her feet to see the offending stick, wonders if it's too late to run for her life.

But when she looks up again, the man is gone.

She waits to see if it was an illusion, something she could have imagined. The shape of all men, she fears, but he had looked like ... had looked like—

She shakes out her head, and turns to go home.

But there before her is him.

The man from those cold dreams on the side of the mountain, covering her with those wings. Impossible, she thinks, holding out a hand to touch him. Her dragon, how could this be? She reaches out her fingertips to touch the scars on his face, pale and shining slightly in the sunlight. He leans into her touch, pressing his lips against her scarred palm.

“Alina,” he says, and it's the first time she's really heard him speak.

She swallows back her shock and steps closer instead, wrapping an arm around his waist. He draws her into him and bends down to shower her with small kisses. These are the lightest kisses she's ever known, and Alina laughs through them all, her spirit healing and content in his arms.

When she feels the deep scar around his neck, Alina's smile fades, and she steps back to look at him. His gray eyes are bright in the sunlight, so different from the dark black she had come to know in her cave.

"It's ours now, Alina, all of it," he nods his head toward the clearing around him, but then Alina remembers the screaming wind the night before, and she knows he means something different. She swallows dry and freezes in his arms.

He notices, but never stops clutching the wrist of her hand that lays so gently against this cheek.

"Will you leave with me?" he asks.

She wants to say no, but she says nothing. They are wretched creatures, she thinks. This might be the beginning for them both, but oh, the end they'll have.

She imagines their deaths, years from now. Alina sighs into his arms, and her heart clenches. Not from fear.

From excitement.

"What do I call you?" she simpers against his chest. "'My dragon'?"

His smile presses against the wave of her hair, and he breathes his name into it.

"Aleksander."

He steps away from her, but holds out his hand.

"Will you take it?" he asks.

Without pause, she takes it.

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